DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 255 039 FL 014 921

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TITLE Launching Foreign Language Programs in Elementary Schools: Highpoints, Headaches and How To's.
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Second/Foreign Language Acquisition by Children (Oklahoma City, OK, March 28-29, 1985).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Coordination; Educational Facilities; Educational Objectives; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Curriculum; Extracurricular Activities; *FLES; Grouping (Instructional Purposes); *Institutional Cooperation; Nonprofit Organizations; Parent Participation; *Program Administration; Program Descriptions; Program Development; *Program Implementation; School Business Relationship; *Second Language Programs; Student Characteristics; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Total Physical Response; Washington (Seattle)

ABSTRACT

The Language School in Seattle has conducted extracurricular foreign language classes in 31 local elementary schools for several years. Each school has a parent coordinator, the courses are tuition-supported, and the objectives are to establish language learning interest and cultural awareness using the Total Physical Response method. A dramatic jump in enrollment marked the third year of the program, with some leveling off later for financial and administrative reasons and because some PTA's decided to offer their own programs. Several problem areas persisted in the program, including: (1) unrealistic parent expectations; (2) student discipline problems and the need for consistent policy; (3) the need for consistent and committed teachers; (4) the need for good communication and constant contact between the organizers, parents, parent coordinators, host schools, and teaching staff; (5) inadequate marketing to maintain high interest levels; (6) the need for host school support; and (7) inadequate facilities. Four elements needed for program success include realistic expectations clearly communicated to all concerned parties, dynamic and committed teachers, a committed core group of parents willing to take on administrative responsibilities, and constant contact and communication among all participants about all aspects of the program. (MSE)

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LAUNCHING FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS
HIGHPOINTS, HEADACHES AND HOW TO'S

Presentation given at the International Conference on Second/Foreign Language Acquisition by Children, Oklahoma City, March 1985.

Ulrike Criminale

THE SETTING

Over the pase five years, The Language School in Seattle, WA has been setting up extra curricular foreign language classes in 31 local elementary schools. All classes meet twice a week for 45 minutes, right before or after the regular school day on school premises. There is a minimum of ten and a maximum of twelve students per class. Students are grouped together in age spans no greater than three grade levels. The program is entirely tuition supported.

Each school has a parent coordinator. S/he sends out the registration forms, collects tuition, stands by on the first day of class, observes the classes occasionally and helps to monitor the program during the school year. S/he is the liaison between the teachers, the parents, the host school administration and The Language School.

In the 1984/85 school year the tuition was $108 for 24 weeks or 48 contact hours. In the 1985/86 school year that amount will have to increase slightly.

The goal of these classes is to create an awareness and sensitivity of other cultures through contact with another language at an early age; to make that first contact an enjoyable experience; to spark interest in further language study later in life; to teach vocabulary and basic phrases in the context

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of activities and games, using the 'Total Physical Response' teaching method.

The teachers do not have to be certified. However, all should have had experience working with children. Training in Total Physical Response is provided for all teachers.

HIGHPOINTS

The Language School started to serve the Seattle community in 1976 and originally offered language classes for adults only. In 1979, after an initial experimental summer program for children, the first classes were offered at two elementary schools during the school year. For two years the program grew only slowly. In the meantime, several Commission reports: "A Nation at Risk' and 'Excellence in Education' among others had stressed the need for foreign language study.

In the 1982/83 and 1983/84 school years the number of requests to set up classes addressed to The Languge School by parents of elementary school children jumped dramatically to 84 and then to 118. The number of concurrently participating schools reached 22 at its highest point and the number of students was 911 at that time.

In the present 1984/85 school year those numbers have dropped slightly to 18 schools in six different school districts with 64 classes and 724 students. There are three main reasons for this drop off.

1. For the first time in that school year parents had to make a committment for the whole year and pay the whole amount in advance. As opposed to signing up for two 12-week semesters separately, this new policy was started to provide more continuity for those students who wanted to continue and whose classes were jeopardized by students dropping out in the middle of the year. While providing that continuity, this set up through the doubled payment prevented some parents from signing up their children.

2. The minimum number of students was increased from eight to ten, resulting in some classes not reaching the required number.

3. The PTA's in several schools decided to set up and administer their own program, a development which shows the increasing committment of parents to foreign language education for children.

HEADACHES

A number of persistent problem areas are connected with this program.

1. Parents

It is extremely important to make the goals and objectives known and understood to all participants of the program, since unrealistic expectations about what can be accomplished in such a short time are prevalent. The foreign language classes are tuition supported and therefore subject to the laws of supply and demand. If the parents are dissatisfied, the children bored or simply moving on to other activities, i.e. music or sports the first thing to be dropped will be the language classes.

2. Students

Quite frequently teachers are faced with students who become discipline problems. Often they are the brightest class members who become bored if they are not constantly challenged. At other times the child may have joined the class because of parent pressure rather than his or her own desire. Whatever the reasons, discipline problems have to be handled immediately and firmly. A formal discipline policy, known and accepted by all, will help to solve the problem.

3. Teachers

The teachers are the people who make or break the program. It is their enthusiasm and skill which holds the children's attention, their inventiveness in the choice of games and activities which makes the subject come alive. Since they are the

ones who deliver, they have to be chosen with great care. Once committed, they will have to be given the best possible training in the chosen teaching method. If they are not experienced teachers, they also have to be shown how to handle the inevitable discipline problems.

The fact that teachers quite often are looking for and moving on to more lucrative and/or full-time employment presents a problem, in that the organizers of language programs constantly have to be on the lookout for new staff.

4. The organizers

Whether they are PTA groups or organizations from the private sector like The Language School, several areas should receive special and constant attention.

- Realistic goals and objectives have to be established early on and clearly communicated with staff and parents. This is best done during a preliminary general meeting with everybody concerned.
- Constant contact needs to be maintained between the organizers, the parents, the parent coordinators, the host schools and the teaching staff. In a situation where there is no central location and teachers' lounge this is rather difficult and needs to be done by special meeting, phone, memo or newsletter or all of the above.
- Finally, the product needs to be marketed to maintain a high interest level. Foreign language week is one logical time for these efforts.

5. Host schools

The support of the administration and staff of the host school is quite important. In the case where PTA pressure establishes a foreign language program over the objections or indifference of a principal, the classes tend to peter out after a while, whereas the support of the respective principal will contribute to likely success.

Finally, adequate rooms, rather than storage closets are needed to conduct good classes.

HOW TO'S

The four most important elemnts for likely success can be summed up as follows:

1. Realistic expectations clearly communicated to all people concerned.
2. Dynamic and committed teachers who are never late, full of ideas and enthusiasm, native speakers or in excellent command of the language, able to handle discipline well and using an exciting teaching method. (In the case of Language School programs Total Physical Response was chosen).
3. A committed core group of parents willing to take on a lot of administrative work and to do trouble shooting throughout the year.
4. Constant contact and communication between all participants about all aspects of the program.

For further information please contact The Language School at (206) 682-6985.

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